

Out of Hours Books & Poetry

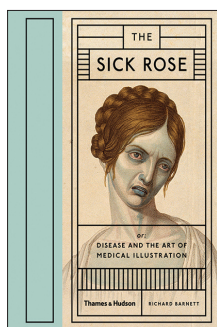
GROTESQUELY ALLURING

The Sick Rose Or; Disease and the Art of Medical Illustration

Richard Barnett

Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2014

HB, 256pp, £19.95, 978-0500517345

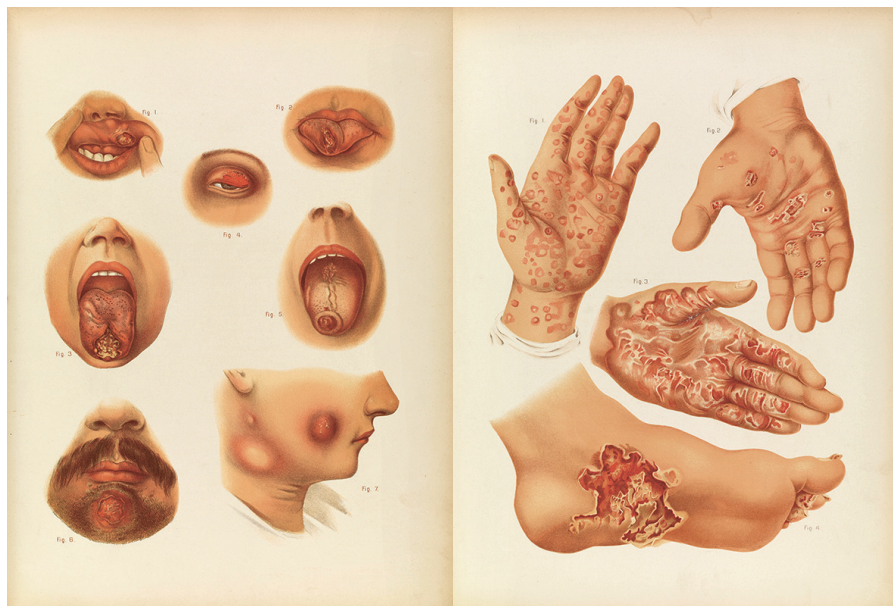


Barely had I got through the door of the mess with my copy of *The Sick Rose*, before a number of colleagues had stopped me, intrigued by the familiar cover picture depicting cholera. Reactions varied from disgust to amazement as, I guarantee, will yours, as you peruse this wonderful annal of 'Disease and the Art of Medical Illustration'.

Split into 10 chapters, skin — 'The boundary of the Body' — is given extensive coverage, including smallpox and leprosy. Incredible hand-drawn Japanese images of smallpox from the late 17–18th century had me simultaneously entranced and repulsed. Although fascinating, I hope never to witness this degree of aesthetic carnage from disease in my lifetime.

Barnett weaves a dark history of the anatomy underworld leaving me grateful that lax laws of cadaver procurement no longer exist. Bodysnatchers in Britain were kept in check with the 1832 Anatomy Act. Interestingly, there is still no knowledge of exactly how the bodies were obtained for *Gray's Anatomy* published in 1852.

The revelation of syphilitic artists, including Beethoven, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche, begins the chapter on venereal disease telling of a time when surgeons treated syphilis with mercury. The book marries art history with medical illustration history throughout but particularly well in this chapter, with more gory insight into syphylitic tongues displayed almost akin to an internet image search of grotesque proportions. The presumption of mid-19th century physicians and the elite that prostitutes were the main vessel of syphilis that informed male artists, who



Various kinds of syphilitic lesions affecting the lips, tongue, face, hands and feet. © Courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

began portraying syphilis as 'voluptuous, alluring deadly women', is explored here in the paintings of Richard Tennant Cooper.

Although *The Sick Rose* justifies praise alone for the scholarly Barnett rendering historical content entertaining, flicking through makes me nostalgic for the rite of passage of dissection, now sadly defunct for many medical schools. There is something romantic about the marriage of science and art and it is astoundingly displayed with the wealth of the Wellcome Collection's anatomical art library in this book.

Illustration seems antiquated within our camera-ready, e-sharing society, making *The Sick Rose* even more charming as a coffee table book. Just be wary of leaving it there when serving cake, as it will meddle with even the hardest of stomachs!

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ANTIBIOTICS

*Just because you demand it
I won't prescribe them like a lemming,
You've made my life so difficult
Sir Alexander Fleming.
I know it would be easier
To write 'Amoxicillin',
But it wouldn't be good medicine
And so I am not willin'
To be coerced by your shouting
Or the claim you won't get better
Despite my explanation and
Patient info letter
Which explains you've got a virus
And t'would be no good for you
To pump you with antibiotics
And give you thrush and runny poo.
So forgive me if I try to
Follow best practice and do it right ...
But we both know you'll call out-of hours
And get antibiotics tonight.*

I wrote this at a workshop entitled *Conflicts in Medicine* when we were encouraged to use poetry to express conflicts encountered within our clinical practice. I expect many GPs will be familiar with this particular problem!

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